



Decolonising Knowledge: Can *Ubuntu* Ethics Save Us from Coloniality?

Piet Naude¹

Received: 14 June 2017 / Accepted: 3 December 2017 / Published online: 13 December 2017
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V., part of Springer Nature 2017

Abstract

This essay discusses whether an indigenous African ethic, as expressed in *ubuntu*, may serve as an example of how to decolonise Western knowledge. In the first part, the key claims of decolonisation of knowledge are set out. The second part analyses three strategies to construct models of ‘African’ (business) ethics, namely transfer, translation and stating of a substantive rival model as contained in *ubuntu* ethics. After a critical appraisal of this substantive proposal, part three indicates the potential and limitation of the decolonisation project: possibilities lie in the (re)-contextualisation of knowledge, whereas limitations are related to constructing an alternative to what is known as ‘scientific’ knowledge. As far as the author knows, this is the first attempt to frame (business) ethics in terms of the epistemological search for ‘decolonised’ knowledge.

Keywords Decolonisation · African ethics · Ubuntu ethics · Western ethics · Scientific knowledge

The Quest for ‘Decolonised’ Knowledge

One of the core demands of the #FeesMustFall student protest movement in South Africa over the last 2 years (2015–2016) has been for ‘decolonised’ education. This concern is not unique to (South) Africa and expresses a global concern about ‘colonial’ knowledge. For example, the Center of Study and Investigation for Decolonial Dialogue from Barcelona (Spain) explains its decolonising effort as follows: ‘A basic assumption of the project takes knowledge-making, since the European Renaissance, as a fundamental aspect of coloniality—the process of domination and exploitation of the Capitalist/Patriarchal/Imperial Western Metropolis over the rest of the world’. This coloniality ‘denies the epistemic diversity of the world and pretends to be mono-epistemic’. The Western tradition of thought ‘is the hegemonic perspective within the world system with the epistemic privilege to define for the rest of the world, as part of an imperial universal design, concepts such as democracy, human rights, economy, feminism, politics, history, etc. Non-Western¹ traditions of thought are concomitantly inferiorized and subalternized. ... There is no modernity without coloniality’.²

The same sentiments are expressed in the very interesting paper by Achille Mbembe, titled ‘Decolonising knowledge and the question of the archive’.³ He asks the question what a Eurocentric canon is and then responds: ‘A Eurocentric canon is a canon that attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production. It is a canon that disregards other knowledge traditions’ (Mbembe 2015, p. 9). He proceeds: ‘The problem—because there is a problem indeed—with this tradition is that has become hegemonic’ (Mbembe 2015, p. 10).

Mbembe concludes that the decolonising project has two sides: A critique of the dominant Western models of knowledge and the development of alternative models. ‘This is where a lot remains to be done’ (Mbembe 2015, p. 18).

Indeed, a lot remains to be done. One could summarise the concerns of knowledge decolonisation as follows: Western knowledge traditions have become the norm for all knowledge; the methodologies underlying these traditions are seen as the only forms of true knowledge, which has led to a reduction in epistemic diversity; because of the institutional and epistemic power that Western traditions hold, they constitute the centre of knowledge so that other forms of

✉ Piet Naude
piet.naude@usb.ac.za

¹ University of Stellenbosch Business School, Bellville, South Africa

¹ Those who resist domination by Western knowledge often refer to other knowledges as ‘non-Western’, revealing the deep bias they are trying to overcome.

² Retrieved from <http://www.dialogoglobal.com/barcelona/description.php> (Accessed 19 January 2017).

³ The lecture was delivered in 2015, and this date is therefore used in the references.

knowledge are suppressed and are seen as inferior—a situation described as ‘coloniality’. Decolonisation has specific relevance to Africa, as this continent finds itself in a post-colonial era, but its knowledge and university curricula still reflect the dominance of Western knowledge forms.

This essay speaks to some of the salient issues raised in the decolonisation of knowledge debate via the case study of an African (business) ethic. The focus is therefore not on the material content of African ethics as such, but to use key aspects of attempts to construct an African ethics as illustration of the cultural and epistemological claims underlying coloniality. The concern of centre-periphery power asymmetry so eloquently expressed by decolonisation academics will be confirmed. As Mbembe intimates, this is the easy part. The constructive effort to build an alternative is the difficult task. This essay therefore embarks on a discussion of different ways in which one can talk about ‘African’ ethics, taking the *ubuntu* debates as main example of the potential and constraints of such an ‘African’ ethic. The paper ends with a short evaluation of whether *ubuntu* ethics holds potential to rescue African intellectuals from coloniality.

As a precursor to the discussion, it is important to raise the concern that to talk about ‘African’ ethics rests on the questionable assumption that it is indeed possible to speak about ‘an African’ approach abstracted from the complex histories, cultures and geographies of Africa.⁴ This is a familiar paradox where one attempts to build a model based on generalisations while knowing that such generalisations are distortions of the particularities from which they are abstracted. Where these generalisations are mostly filtered through the lenses of colonial and post-colonial views, the task for abstracting an ‘indigenous’ or ‘traditional’ African view becomes even more complex.

It would therefore technically be more appropriate to speak of African knowledges or ethics or value traditions in the plural form. This is, however, rarely done, as we have grown accustomed to explaining particular complexities with a singular and a universal approach. Models gain their explanatory value exactly from such generalisations, and this essay therefore ventures to speak about ‘African ethics’ in the singular, though concerns about the empirical validity of the very general value claims made in the name of ‘sub-Saharan African people’ will be raised below.

Advocates for decolonisation are right that by adding the adjective ‘African’ (or Chinese,⁵ or Japanese)⁶ to ethics,

⁴ In the same way it is an abstraction to speak about ‘a Western’ or ‘a European’ approach.

⁵ See the Chinese approach to business ethics as set out by Lu (2010).

⁶ See the classic text written already in 1899 by Inazo Nitobe (source here from 2004) on Samurai ethics in the context of Japanese culture.

the marginal intellectual and geo-ethical position of Africa may be reinforced. In the ‘centre’ there is (an assumed) ‘universal’ ethics derived from the dominance of Western philosophy, which is taken as the norm and point of reference, but rarely described as ‘Western’.⁷ And on the margins are the adjective ethics with curiosity value and an overt contextuality.⁸

The reality facing a scholar from Africa (or other marginal sites) is that there is no way to escape the already well-developed traditions in ethics with the accompanying technical terms and canonical/classical texts. This is in fact the very way in which African-based scholars are introduced to ‘ethics’. There is no *tabula rasa* or Archimedes starting point ‘in Africa’ from where one can subsequently approach the established canons of ethics built over a 2,400-year reflective, written tradition in the West.

The intellectual journey to Africa always starts in Europe: An African scholar travels an arduous intellectual journey to first understand the rich and complex traditions of ‘ethics’. We learn the names of the great thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Schopenhauer, Marx and Nietzsche. We hear about the established models of ethics explained in terms such as virtue, deontology and utility. Once this tradition is understood, our hermeneutical lenses have already been shaped. So when we ‘return’ our gaze to Africa to reflect upon ‘traditional values’ or ‘indigenous knowledge systems’, the only categories and intellectual apparatus at our disposal are the Western ones. Whatever we seek and might find locally will have to be explained in English and in terms of the established academic tradition, otherwise it simply does not ‘make sense’ to outsiders. The local voice, if heard at all, will only be taken seriously if judged and legitimised in terms of the accepted standards already established. The homogenising power of academic globalisation renders ‘local’ ethics as an interesting variation on the normative tradition with which it is always compared.

⁷ Books with the title of ‘business ethics’ very rarely, if ever, explain themselves as *Western* business ethics, nor does one find an *American* business ethics journal in the same vein as the *African Journal of Business Ethics*. (This does not preclude American journals for sociology, bioethics, and so forth.)

⁸ That we in Africa are inevitably drawn towards the centre is, for example, evident from the very successful and good book, *Business ethics*, edited by colleagues Deon Rossouw and Leon van Vuuren. This book started in 1994 as *Business ethics: A Southern African perspective*. It became *Business ethics in Africa* in 2002, and as from the third edition (2004) onwards, the title has just been *Business ethics*. For an appreciative discussion of this development up to 2010, read Naudé (2011).

Models of 'African' Business Ethics

Let us—for argument's sake—accept this centre–periphery configuration as the reality of doing ethics, but take on the challenge to develop (business) ethics from an 'African' perspective. Three broad options for an 'African' business ethics emerge in ascending order of localisation: a direct transfer of Western ethics to Africa (transfer model); different attempts to translate Western ethics into the context of Africa (translation model); and the development of a uniquely African position via the so-called *ubuntu* principle (substantive model). The first two options are enumerated with minimal description, after which the potential of a substantive, alternative *ubuntu* ethics is explored in more depth.

The Transfer Model

In this model, Western ethics is taken as the norm and held up as the ideal approach to ethics. This dominant tradition is then read and simply transferred to the context of Africa. There is very little 'translation', no contextual adaptation and rarely any critical reception. This can happen with any standard Western textbook. When, for example, James Rachel's fine collection, *The right thing to do* (1989), with its readings in moral philosophy drawn *inter alia* from Aquinas, Kant, Mill, Kant and Hobbes, is used as lecturing material in an African classroom, those names are simply held up by lecturers as 'basic readings' that everyone interested in moral philosophy should know.

The consequence is that the adjective 'Africa' in this case, if used at all, describes nothing more than a geographical reading location. Whether one reads Aristotle and Kant in Lagos, Cairo, Nairobi or Berlin, it makes no difference. This is the way in which most African students (like myself) are taught ethics and philosophy. We neither realise that we are introduced to a 'Western' tradition, nor that there are 'Africans' (such as Augustine and the Alexandrian School) who made significant contributions to this tradition. The question of an 'African' approach to ethics always comes later, if at all—and then it is impossible to jump over our own European shadows.

The Translation Model

There are at least three possible forms of translation that one may discern from a reading of business ethics literature. In each case, the normative position of Western ethics is accepted, but there is an interaction with the African context that goes further than a mere transfer of knowledge.

First, there is an elucidation of Western ethics from an African perspective. In this case, there is an (uneven)

reciprocal relation⁹ between Western ethics and African contexts: The Western insights are taken as basis from which to interpret local contexts with the consequence that these contexts themselves are made sense of, or are critically appraised, in terms of the accepted Western perspective with an illuminating effect on the Western idea itself.

In a paper 'In defence of partisan justice: What can African business ethics learn from John Rawls?' (Naudé 2007), the insight of structuring society behind a veil of ignorance with the least advantaged representative person as reference point is translated into the African context with specific implications for business ethics.

Second, a popular way to make a contextual, African contribution to ethics is the translation of local case studies into the frameworks of Western theories or ideas. One of the tasks to indigenise business school curricula is exactly by providing local case studies instead of dominant examples from the North.¹⁰ Typical questions could be the following: What does the Walmart takeover or SAB Miller merger teach us about *stakeholder theory*? How can a *utilitarian approach* be used to argue for/against implementation of a minimum wage in South Africa? In what way does Islamic finance in Africa illustrate the potential of a *deontological ethics*?

A third way of translation occurs when context-specific African ethical problems are addressed with recourse to insights from the Western tradition. In this case, African ethics focuses on moral dilemmas that are particular to our context and seeks resolution of these questions by making use of Western theories. For example: Can corrupt business practices in Africa be explained by recourse to *Kohlberg's stages of moral formation*?¹¹ How can extensive management–labour conflicts be resolved by using the *creating shared value notion* developed by Porter and Kramer (2011)?

It is clear that the translation model does achieve a significant gain over a mere transfer, but as an example of decolonising knowledge, its contribution is minimal, as it relies on the Western insights and theories for its construction. In other words: There are local languages with some interesting variations, but the language from which and into which

⁹ Further examples: In what way do rites of passage in Africa represent the concept of 'tradition' as set out by Alisdair MacIntyre? How do African proverbs illustrate 'choosing the mean between extremes', as proposed by Aristotle?

¹⁰ See, for example, the more than 500 cases listed by the African Association of Business Schools (www.aabschools.com) and the sources provided by the South African Business School Association (www.sabsa.co.za). See the interesting case studies listed in Chapter 23 of Rossouw and Van Vuuren (2013).

¹¹ Lawrence Kohlberg completed his *Essays on moral development* in two volumes (1981 and 1984) and both were published in San Francisco by Harper & Row. His work has become an established part of ethical theories of moral formation.

the translation takes place is predominantly ‘English’ (as a metaphor for the Western traditions).

The Substantive Model: *Ubuntu* Ethics

In this model, Western ethics is taken as a valuable tradition, but there is an endeavour to develop a distinct ethics that could be called ‘African’. The claim is that *ubuntu* ethics constitutes an additional, competing and alternative theoretical framework to those received via the Western tradition, hence the calling of this model ‘substantive’.

There has been a considerable growth in the literature to design an ‘*ubuntu* ethics’ deriving from the African continent. This essay does not give a literature overview, but engages with some of the most important representatives in furthering the argument about the possibility of an African ethic. The most advanced analytical work in this field has over recent years been done by Thaddeus Metz, who, in a seminal essay ‘Toward an African moral theory’ (Metz 2007b), outlines at least six senses in which *ubuntu* is used. He comes to the conclusion that there is indeed an indigenous African ethics that expresses the communitarian approach of Africans in distinction to the individualism of Europe. This qualifies his work as a substantive approach to African ethics. According to him, this *ubuntu* ethic may be summarised in the following principle of right action: ‘An action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on goodwill; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will’ (Metz 2007b, p. 338; read also Metz 2012).

To assist in the advancement of this important debate, my contribution—framed in the quest for decolonised knowledge—is to argue that the *ubuntu* project is based on a number of questionable claims:

First, the claim is that *ubuntu* derives from a universal respect for being-through-the-other, but it will be shown that its origin and social setting are tribal kinship relations.

Second, the claim is that *ubuntu* is a uniquely African phenomenon, but it will be argued that the values associated with *ubuntu* are based on generalisations that are not empirically proven and, even if accepted, are prevalent in most pre-modern and small-scale communities.

Third, the claim is that *ubuntu* expresses African communitarian views in contrast to Western individualism and rationalism. It will be argued that personhood and autonomy are inherent in all societies, including those in Africa, and sociality or being-through-the-other is indeed integral to Western philosophy as well.

The classical academic discussion of what became known as the *ubuntu* idea derives from John Mbiti in his book

African religions and philosophy (1969).¹² I will use this work as primary reference point to develop a critical assessment of *ubuntu*.

According to Mbiti (1969, p. 108–109), ‘[w]hatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am”. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man’.

First Argument

One should carefully note that the quotation above is set in Mbiti’s discussion of ethnic groups, kinship, (extended) family life and the individual. Mbiti wishes to avoid the negative connotation of the word ‘tribe’ and prefers to speak of ‘people’ or ‘peoples’. He emphasises that African peoples are to be differentiated on a number of factors: language, geographical boundaries (however fluid), a common culture expressed via a history with particular national figures and common ancestors, as well as common customs. He further mentions that ‘each people has its own distinct social and political organisation’ with tribal chiefs, extended families and persons with special status. Each people also has its own religious system: ‘Traditional religions are not universal: they are tribal or national’ (Mbiti 1969, p. 4). It therefore warrants to speak of African religions in the plural (Mbiti 1969, p. 1), while ‘a person cannot be converted from one tribal religion to another’, just as it is impossible to change tribal membership that is based on birth (Mbiti 1969, p. 103–104).

When proceeding to discuss kinship, Mbiti points out that the ‘deep sense of kinship, with all it implies, has been one of the strongest forces in traditional African life’. He immediately explains: ‘Kinship is reckoned through blood and betrothal (engagement and marriage).¹³ It is kinship which controls social relations between people *in a given community*: it governs marital customs and regulations, it determines the behaviour of one individual toward another’ (Mbiti 1969, p. 104, my emphasis). This kinship is extended to the living dead (ancestors) and even covers animals and non-living objects through the totemic system. For Mbiti

¹² It must be noted that Mbiti himself did not use the actual word ‘*ubuntu*’ in this study to describe an African philosophy, but, as is evident from the quotation above, and looking at subsequent discussions of *ubuntu*, he does express the idea quite distinctly. The fact that someone does not explicitly presents her thinking as ‘*ubuntu*’ does not exclude that ideas underlying *ubuntu* could be overtly present.

¹³ See Ramose’s emphasis on the family (in its extended form) as social basis for an African philosophy. ‘No doubt there will be variations within this broad philosophical “family atmosphere”. But the blood circulating through the “family” members is the same in its basics’ (2002c, p. 230).

‘almost all the concepts connected with human relationship can be understood and interpreted through the kinship system. This is what largely governs the behaviour, thinking and whole life of the individual *in the society of which he [sic] is a member*’ (Mbiti 1969, p. 104, my emphasis).

Although Mbiti points out that cultural exchange occurs among African peoples and that ideas found in one people may be found in a different form in another people (Mbiti 1969, p. 103), his discussion of the ‘*ubuntu*’ idea is fundamentally situated within the social boundaries of a particular people.

One can obviously abstract the idea of *ubuntu* from its social embeddedness in a particular people and then develop a kind of universal goodwill idea with some moral force. This is what African (and other) ethicists do. But to claim that traditional Africans in general upheld a universal notion of *ubuntu* that includes ‘all others’¹⁴ is simply not supported by Mbiti’s discussion or by empirical research.¹⁵ If it is said that ‘I am, because we are’, the ‘we’ that shapes the ‘I’ has a particular ethnic and kinship character, and not a universal (‘I am through all others’) connotation.¹⁶ Translated into current contexts, *ubuntu* could consequently mean that I use my power in society to benefit those who are ‘of my own’. I am a person through the ones close to me, and they benefit from my patronage to the exclusion of others who are not from my nation, tribe, family or political party. This tribal notion of *ubuntu* lies at the heart of factionalism in Africa.

Second Argument

It is claimed that *ubuntu* is a uniquely African phenomenon, but it will be argued that the values associated with it are not proven empirically and are prevalent in most pre-modern and small-scale communities.

Mbiti points out that he is discussing African philosophy in its ‘traditional’ sense: traditional religions, traditional

beliefs, traditional attitudes and traditional philosophies. He is aware of ‘modern’ influences such as education, urbanisation and industrialisation ‘by which individuals become detached from their traditional environments’. He is also keenly aware of the global power of modernity: ‘The man [sic] of Africa must get up and dance, for better and for worse, on the arena or world drama. His image of himself and of the universe is disrupted and must make room for the changing ‘universal’ and not simply “tribal” man’ (Mbiti 1969, p. 216). Some Africans are less affected by the changes (rural and illiterate people), but even where outward change to a ‘modern’ life takes place, many still hold on to some traditional beliefs.

The first problem is that the list of values associated with ‘traditional’ African society and therefore seen as expressions of *ubuntu* is as varied as there are authors on the topic: empathy, care for others, dignity, harmony, inclusivity, respect, reciprocity, forgiveness, community orientation, and so forth. The consequence is ‘that Ubuntu comes to mean no more than what is good or virtuous’ in a very vague sense (West 2014, p. 49), without enough particularity to be of ethical use.¹⁷

The second problem is that the claims made in academic literature about these purported ‘African’ values have thus far not been supported by credible and reliable empirical research. Almost all *ubuntu* writers make the general claim that Africans (at least traditional ones) are ‘communal’ (with the kind of value list as above), while Westerners are ‘individualistic’. Two prominent authors serve as example of this:

Ramose bases his argument of *ubuntu* as ‘the root of African philosophy’ on a fine etymological analysis of *ubuntu*. This linguistic base for *ubuntu* is prevalent among what Ramose calls ‘the Bantu-speaking people’ of Africa,¹⁸ and it is on this analysis that he builds the philosophy and ethics of *ubuntu*. But nowhere does Ramose empirically verify the transition from a linguistic feature to a moral world.¹⁹ He takes his cue for this linguistic analysis from Heidegger, but Heidegger does not make general claims about purported moral convictions held by ‘German-speaking people’ as

¹⁴ In terms of the well-known moral development theory by Lawrence Kohlberg, very few people reach this level of post-conventional ethical maturity where ‘all selves’ matter, beyond the ‘I’ and ‘kinship’ relations. (I am aware of the criticism of Kohlberg from both a gender and culture perspective.)

¹⁵ See discussion on empirical evidence below.

¹⁶ See Naudé 2013: 246 for a critique of the misuse of *ubuntu*: ‘When the supposedly universal boundaries of *ubuntu* (humaneness) are drawn along ethnic or party-political lines, they become a vicious philosophy of exclusion and dehumanisation. When life-enhancing social exchange is turned into corrupt buying of favour, public resources are wasted. When the social ideal of community enhancement is replaced by enrichment for powerful individuals or elite groups, poverty and social marginalisation increase. When a communitarian sense of happiness turns into an ideology of communitarianism where dissenting voices and contrasting opinions are seen as treacherous in principle, consultation (open debate), so famous in traditional African *imbizos*, dies’.

¹⁷ This is a problem that Metz admirably attempts to address in his *ubuntu* theory of right action (Metz 2007b).

¹⁸ See Ramose (2002c, p. 230) and elsewhere in his writing.

¹⁹ What would the response be if I, as a native Afrikaans speaker, refer to the fact that the grammatical structure of the verb ‘to be’ in Afrikaans has been simplified from the complexities of both German and (to a lesser extent) Dutch? The fact that all subjects (nominative case), no matter the gender or the number, use the same version of the verb to be (‘is’) demonstrates that Afrikaans-speaking people of South Africa hold egalitarian values. The transition from a linguistic feature to a moral construct is just that: a construct, the plausibility of which could obviously be questioned. Metz (2007b, p. 321) even excludes ‘Islamic Arabs in North Africa and white Afrikaners in South Africa’ (like myself) from the sphere of *ubuntu*!

derived from his existentialist philosophy or language ontology. In other words, *ubuntu* and its associated values—insofar as they are derived from a linguistic feature—are not entirely convincing.

Thaddeus Metz is at pains to state that his effort to build a theory of right action on the basis of *ubuntu* ‘is a constructive project not an empirical one’ (Metz 2007a, p. 333). This is a fair admission. But he then proceeds on the same page to say that he attempts to build a theory that is different from Western ones. The ‘evidence’ (his word) that he gathered for this ‘African’ claim is from reading books on moral beliefs of Africans, engaging in conferences on the theme, listening to his students from Africa, and speaking to colleagues (Metz 2007a, p. 333, footnotes 3 and 4). He then proceeds: ‘So far as I can tell,²⁰ *it is a fact* that there are several judgments and practices²¹ that are spatio-temporally extensive in Africa, but not in the West’ (Metz 2007a, p. 333, my emphasis).

As Andrew West rightly points out, empirical claims (such as claiming as a fact that sub-Sahara Africans hold distinctive communal values) that are only based on personal experience, anecdotes and impressions are not ‘evidence’ in the academic sense of the word. Empirical claims must flow from valid questionnaires, administered to an acceptable proportion of participants via random sampling followed by credible statistical inferences. West discusses a number of empirical cross-cultural studies on the collectivism–individualism divide by authors such as Hofstede, Thomas and Bedixen, Bernstein, and others,²² and he convincingly (West 2014, p. 53) demonstrates their inconclusive results:

The mixed results and methodological limitations of all these studies preclude any simple generalisations regarding the values of sub-Saharan Africans being justified. It is premature to conclude, on the basis of existing evidence, that sub-Saharan Africans ... do or do not maintain the values of Ubuntu. At present, we can only conclude, that such generalisations are unjustified.

What happened in the *ubuntu* literature is that claims of ‘*ubuntu* values’ (as proliferated as they are) as ‘typical of sub-Saharan Africans’ (as diverse as they are) became part of the canon and were then transmitted via academic cross-references from author to author, creating the impression of an undeniable ‘fact’.

²⁰ Is this preface to the ‘fact’ perhaps an indication of doubt?

²¹ See the Metzian list of these judgements and practices in Metz (2007b, p. 324ff).

²² See West’s examples of more authors making empirical *ubuntu* claims and his discussion of various cross-cultural studies on this topic with associated literature references (West 2014, pp. 50–54).

What is ‘African’ about a set of *ubuntu* values is that it is an abstraction developed mostly by Africa-based or African-associated scholars. In this sense it is an etic, elite reinterpretation of residues of what used to be ‘traditional African’, devoid of the social practices and everyday realities of Africans subject to political, social and economic brutalities in sub-Saharan Africa. In this guise, it may function in two ways: As a utopian vision of society, it may inspire and give (false?) hope, like a kind of empty clarion call. And as a ‘narrative of return’²³ it may provide Africans, subject to rapid modernisation and identity renegotiation,²⁴ some sense of anchorage in an idealised pre-colonial past.²⁵

But it fails as a project of decolonisation, because it ‘essentialises’ Africans (exactly what a colonial mind does) and as an elite abstraction it mirrors colonial power structures that exactly inhibit the move to release Africans from their oppression under coloniality.

The third problem relates specifically to the ‘uniqueness’²⁶ claim of *ubuntu*. I concur with the few *ubuntu* authors that point out that *ubuntu* is not unique²⁷ and actually expresses a universal sense²⁸ of humanity.

If we, for the moment, accept the value description of Mbiti’s ‘traditional’ African societies, the question arises whether what is termed ‘*ubuntu*’ is not in fact a description of most pre-modern, ‘traditional’ or ‘small-scale’ societies,

²³ For a discussion and literature of this term coined by C.B.N Gade in 2011, read West (2014, p. 55).

²⁴ The threat to a purported *ubuntu* lifestyle has its roots in the combined effect of Africans being swept off their feet by an ‘accelerated modernity’ (Smit 2007, p. 83) and the impact of cultural globalisation (Naudé 2007) together with the interiorisation of the colonial master’s image of Africans. The former implies an attitude of cultural diffidence (‘global is always better than local’); the latter a deep sense of inferiority: ‘If I do not look, act and talk like my former master now the centre of the global village], then I have not “made” it yet’.

²⁵ For discussion and references to Gade and Van Binsbergen on these criticism of *ubuntu*, see West (2014, pp. 54–55).

²⁶ Metz (2007c, p. 375) speaks of ‘distinctiveness’: ‘A moral theory counts as “distinctive” insofar as it differs from what is dominant in contemporary Anglo-American and Continental philosophy’. My view is that his theory of right action indeed shows potential of being distinctive; although its claim to be ‘African’ on the basis of particular ‘beliefs that are common among peoples of sub-Saharan Africa’ is not convincing. The only sense in which Metz’s work is ‘African’ is that is done from a geographical location in Africa and in dialogue with a body of literature developed predominantly by African and African-based scholars.

²⁷ See Broodryk (1996, pp. 35–36) who, after comparing *ubuntu* with a variety of thought constellations (communism, capitalism, Marxism, etc.), concludes: ‘If unique means unusual, incomparable, extra-ordinary, Ubuntuism then seems not to be unique. Ubuntu does not exist only in one culture; people of all cultures and races can have “this magic gift or sadly lack it. In each of us some of these qualities exist”’.

²⁸ See Nussbaum (2009) on a ‘common humanity’ and Lutz (2009, p. 319) who, inter alia, forges links between *ubuntu* and Confucianism.

irrespective of their geographical location? This question can be answered in the affirmative when one reads studies on personhood in ancient Egypt;²⁹ concepts of autonomy in early rabbinical societies,³⁰ the effect of monetisation on interpersonal relations in sixth-century BCE Greece,³¹ the shifting concept of trust from ‘traditional’ to contemporary Chinese communities,³² as well as descriptions of early faith communities in the New Testament with the values embedded in, for example, the body metaphor.³³

It is clear that in most ‘traditional’ societies a person is established as person when he/she is embedded in social relations and that there is an ontological reciprocity between individual and society. This applies to Europe as well where, for example, Ferdinand Tönnies³⁴ makes a distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) based on affectual loyalty so typical of pre-modern relations (*ubuntu*-type communities) and *Gesellschaft* (society), which is marked by impersonal, functional relations, for example the rational agreements contained in commercial contracts prevalent in modern, industrial contexts.

²⁹ Famous Egyptologist Jan Assmann describes personhood in ancient Egypt as being constituted via life-in-connectivity with others: ‘Ein Mensch entsteht nach Massgabe seiner konstellativen Entfaltung in der “Mitwelt” seiner Familie, Freunde, Vorgesetzten, Abhängigen. Ein Mensch, nach altägyptischer Vorstellung, ist ein konstellatives Phänomen’ (Assmann 2002, p. 15). Like Mbiti’s description of relations beyond life on earth, Assmann points to the extended death rituals in ancient Egypt to facilitate the relationship with persons in the ‘Nachwelt’. In short, Assmann states that the human person in ancient Egypt has his/her origin in a constellation of relationships. You are a human person insofar as you are ‘being accompanied’ by others.

³⁰ Read the two types of ‘autonomy’ explained by Fishbane with regard to rabbinical thought, where there is both a personal autonomy and an autonomy that is only possible within the community of believers (Fishbane, 2002, pp. 125–126).

³¹ See the succinct analysis by Tony Hölscher (2014) of the transition in the Greek polis from trust-based, personal, gift and exchange communities to non-personal, transactional relations in a monetised economy.

³² See Lu’s discussion of one-on-one trust in traditional Chinese communities that are being transformed by ‘modern society’ to ‘universal trust’ as response to China’s opening up to the global economy (Lu 2010, pp. 117–127).

³³ See the narratives of these small-scale communities in the book of Acts and the normative vision of reciprocity, care, benevolence, service and assistance (*ubuntu* values?) contained in the letters to the Corinthians (chapters 12–14), Romans (Chapter 15), Ephesians (Chapter 4) and Philippians (Chapter 2).

³⁴ His book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologie* was originally published in 1881. It is a sociological reflection on the transition from rural, peasant communal (*ubuntu*?) societies to associational societies based on impersonal relations. See the 4th edition published in 1922 by Karl Curtius in Berlin: <https://archive.org/details/gemeinschaftundgg00tn> (Accessed 21 January 2017).

The idea that ‘I am a person through other persons’ in a close-knit community of reciprocity is therefore not a uniquely African phenomenon. The only ‘uniquely African’ part is the depiction thereof via the concept of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.³⁵

Third Argument

Ubuntu expresses African communitarian views in contrast to Western individualism and rationalism. It will be argued that personhood and autonomy are inherent in all societies, including Africa, and sociality or being-through-the-other is indeed integral to Western philosophy as well.

The ‘Individualist’ Dimension of African Personhood Let us turn to the complex notion of ‘making a person’ and the relation between an individual and the community in which he/she lives.

On the one hand, Mbiti argues what one would call a ‘communitarian’ perspective: ‘In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people ... He is simply part of the whole. *The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual*; for the individual depends on the corporate group’ (Mbiti 1969, p. 108, my emphasis).

On the other hand, Mbiti holds on to what one could call an ‘individualist’ perspective: ‘Just as God made the first man, as God’s man, so now *man himself makes the individual who becomes a corporate or social man*’ (Mbiti 1969, p. 108, my emphasis). An example of this is polygamy, which must, according to Mbiti, ultimately be viewed in the context of enhancing immortality: The greater the number of offspring, the greater the opportunity to be reborn in the multitude of descendants and to be remembered by and through them. A man who enters into a polygamous marriage is ‘making’ both himself and the community. ‘Such a

³⁵ Where this false claim to uniqueness and fuzzy upholding of certain values shows itself in glaring obviousness is when *ubuntu* is translated into leadership and management literature. In preparation for this address, I read some of the popular books by, for example, Mbigi (2005), Broodryk (2005) and Msila (2016). I respect, and in fact support, the translation of academic knowledge into business-friendly and ‘popular’ format. This is what business schools are supposed to do. However, my general conclusion is that *ubuntu* has become a convenient marketing catchphrase (with all the necessary emotion and African flavour attractive to corporate customers) to say nothing new. Catchphrases such as ‘managing people as people’, ‘interdependence’, ‘service leadership’ and ‘collective decision making’ are well known in existing management literature. Depending on one’s ideological position, the rash commodification of *ubuntu* may in fact be viewed as an act of treachery against the decolonisation project. For a critical discussion on the marketisation of *ubuntu*, read McDonald (2010).

man has the attitude that “the more *we are*, the bigger *I am*” (Mbiti 1969, p. 142, emphasis original).

Mbiti also qualifies his references to corporate descriptions to ensure that the element of individuation is not lost: ‘Therefore, when we say in this book that such and such a society “believes” or “narrates” or “performs” such and such, we do not by any means imply that everybody in that society subscribes to that belief or performs that ritual ... *Individuals hold differences of opinion on various subjects*’ (Mbiti 1969, p. 3, my emphasis)—a further testimony to the active presence of individuals and individuality in a given social context (though constrained by patriarchy and other social allocations of power).

This important dimension of ‘self-making’ or *autopoiesis* is lost in the crude contrast that African ethicists set up between ‘Western individualism’ and relational ‘African communalism’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002). In no society, neither Western nor African, can an individual create him- or herself *ex nihilo* or outside of social relations (Keller 2002, pp. 200–201) because the idea that a person can exist as an unmediated sociological reality is simply that—an abstraction, an idea (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, p. 67).

Based on their careful anthropological studies in Africa, the Comaroffs make a number of important observations:

There is no generic view of *the* African conception of personhood. ‘There is no such thing’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, p. 68). Personhood is indeed a social construction, and ‘the person’ is a dynamic negotiated entity, a constant work-in-progress that plays itself out in a social context that is at once highly communal and individuated (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, p. 69, 72) and subject to the resistance of countervailing forces (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, p. 76). The ‘foundational notion of being-as-becoming, of the sentient self as active agent in the world, was so taken for granted that it went largely unsaid’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, p. 73).

The conclusion is clear:

Nowhere in Africa were ideas of individuality ever absent. Individualism, another creature entirely, might not have been at home here before the postcolonial age ... But, each in its own way, African societies *did*, in times past, have a place for individuality, personal agency, property, privacy, biography, signature, and authored action upon the world ... All of which ought to underscore, yet again, why crude contrasts between European and African selfhood make little sense ... (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, p. 78, original emphasis).

This notion of personhood is confirmed by African scholar Kwame Gyekye. According to him, the first post-colonial leaders in Africa (such as Senghor and Kenyatta) over-emphasised the communitarian or communalist nature of

traditional African societies to provide a basis for experiments in African socialism (Gyekye 2002, pp. 298–299). This communitarian conception, reinforced by African philosophers such as Ifeanyi Menkiti,³⁶ upholds the ontological primacy and independence of the community over against the individual with the implication that ‘the person is *wholly* constituted by social relationships’ (Gyekye 2002, p. 298, original emphasis). On the basis of moral agency (individuals are held responsible for their actions) and autonomy ‘that enables one to determine at least some of one’s own goals and to pursue them’ (Gyekye 2002, p. 306), Gyekye rejects as ‘misguided’ the simple contrast between African and Western notions of the person (2002, p. 303). Gyekye holds a restricted or moderate communitarian view (2002, p. 306), because ‘it cannot be persuasively argued that personhood is *fully* defined by the communal structure or social relationships’ (Gyekye 2002, p. 305, original emphasis).

The dynamic nature of African humanness (not humanism) implies for Mogobe Ramose, inter alia, that one’s humanity is confirmed by recognising the humanity of others. This in turn implies that human subjectivity is an essential part of *ubuntu*. ‘If this were no so, it would be senseless to base the affirmation of one’s humanness on the recognition of the same in other’ (Ramose 2002a, p. 644). The group is neither primary to nor does it supersede the individual. ‘The crucial point here is that *motho* is a never finished entity in the sense that the relational context reveals and conceals the potentialities of the individual’ (Ramose 2002a, p. 644).

This ‘individualist’ dimension of African personhood implied by *ubuntu* is mostly ignored by African ethicists. Although there is no interest in the individual solely as an ontological construct but always in a normative relation to others, it does not deny a focus in Africa on personal signature and relative autonomy.

Let us now turn our gaze in the other direction: Is it correct to assume that the Western tradition operates with a rational, autonomous and individualist notion of personhood and that it is therefore different from Africa, which purportedly upholds a ‘relational’ orientation?

An Expanded View on Western Notions of Personhood One could start by pointing to the deep paradox in the very notion of an ‘autonomous individual’, because ‘a non-contextual autonomy—autonomy in and of the self, rather than in relation to another—does not exist’. The reason is that ‘autonomy always arises within a context, relative to those

³⁶ See the 1984 essay by Menkiti with the title ‘Person and community in traditional African thought’, in which he (in my view, wrongly) interprets Mbiti as putting forward a view that personhood is completely determined by communal relations.

from which it claims its independence' (Keller 2002, p. 194). There is always only, paradoxically speaking, a *relational* autonomy.

Acknowledging the context dependence of any claim to 'autonomy', Keller suggests that we need a social ontology wherein we recognise 'the self always and only emergent from its matrix of relations—and therefore never strictly speaking autonomous, however free the agency of that emergence' (Keller 2002, p. 199). This would hold true for the 'thinking I' suggested by Descartes as well as the Enlightened person who is an autonomous rational being according to Kant. Yes, we indeed find in Descartes and Kant powerful expressions of 'the turn to the subject' (see below), but to suggest that this subject is to be equated with a purely decontextualised self-referential individualism is to overlook the fundamental ambiguity of relational autonomy in principle.

Rene Descartes It has become the custom by some African ethicists to build a contrast between *cogito ergo sum* (Western thinking) and the African *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Mbigi 2005, pp. 69–70). This interpretation is a misreading of Descartes, as it assumes that his view of the human person is fully expressed in the *cogito ergo sum* dictum. The confusion arises because Descartes' epistemology is isolated from and simply conflated with this anthropology. African ethicists therefore make a category mistake by comparing Cartesian apples (how do I know?) with African pears (how do I relate to others?).

As is well known, Descartes' aim was to establish an irrefutable basis for knowledge.³⁷ Via a process of methodical doubt he came to the conclusion that the only certainty is in fact doubting all existing knowledge. But to doubt means that I, the doubting individual, must exist. He wrote in his *Meditations II*: 'So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it' (Descartes 1952, p. 78).³⁸ Descartes' further conclusion, after positing that thought is a vital attribute belonging to him, is that he is a real thing and really exists. 'But what thing? I have answered: a thing which thinks' (Descartes 1952, p. 79).³⁹

³⁷ Read the recent impressive history of scientific thought and the prominence of Descartes in the scientific revolution in Wootton (2015, pp. 361–367; 433ff). There is no space to engage in the interesting intellectual dependency of Descartes on physic-mathematician Isaac Beekman.

³⁸ An extended form of the *cogito* is sometimes given as: 'I doubt, therefore I think, and hence I am'.

³⁹ See also *Meditations III*: 'I am a thing that thinks, that is to say, that doubts, affirms, denies, that knows a few things' (Descartes 1952, p. 82).

This summary of himself as 'a thinking thing' early in the *Meditations* reflects his search for an irrefutable basis for true knowledge, but does not exhaust his view of himself as a human person. As Descartes addressed the difficult question of sense perceptions such as feeling pain and hunger and thirst, he asserted that nature teaches him ...

... that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am very closely united to it, and so to speak so intermingled with it that I seem to compose with it one whole ... For all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, etc. are in truth none other than certain confused modes of thought which are produced by the union and apparent intermingling of mind and body (*Meditation VI*, Descartes, 1952, p. 99).⁴⁰

In his last published work, *Passions de l'ame (Passions of the soul)* (1649), Descartes (as the title suggests) turned his attention to discuss the feelings and experiences that arise from the interaction between body and spirit. The six basic passions are wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness, which are seen as physiological phenomena to be studied from a natural scientific perspective to ensure that they are beneficial to humans because they are understood and controlled. The freedom of the human person lies in the ability to reflect on and steer the reciprocal interaction between mind and body, constituting the person as a 'master of his experiences' (see Perler 2002, p. 161).

While Descartes maintained his dualism as well as the primacy of the thinking soul, it would be inappropriate to reduce his richly developed view of the human person to a mere 'thinking I' and then build upon this reductionist basis a perception of 'the Western tradition'.

Immanuel Kant It is, further, a misreading of Kant to claim that he was only promoting a self-confident, rational being who has the courage to seek knowledge with his⁴¹ own mind, without recourse to assistance from other people. Kant, in his essay 'Was ist Aufklärung?', indeed famously described the enlightened person in these terms,⁴² and said that it is very difficult to escape from immaturity and to use our own mind, because the immature state (relying for knowledge and truth on the insights of tradition or others in authority) has become a natural part of who we are. But this essay and the epistemology contained in *Critique of pure reason* (Kant

⁴⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this richer view of personhood in Descartes, read Perler (2002), especially pp. 160–161.

⁴¹ I retain the sexist spirit of Kant's language.

⁴² 'Unmündigkeit ist das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen' (immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding/mind without guidance from another). See Kant (1784, p. 481).

1998) should always be read in conjunction with his ethics in the *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (Kant 1964).

In this latter work Kant explains that the free will that practises the categorical imperative is not merely subject to the law, but is so subject that it must be considered as also making the law for itself. This co-construction of the law with its sensitivity to all human beings as ends in themselves comes to pass because it is ‘in no way based on feelings, impulses, and inclinations, but *only on the relation of rational beings to one another*’ (Kant 1964, p. 102, my emphasis; see Keller 2002, p. 197).

Via his ethics, Kant herewith demonstrated the importance of relationality: not only does the imperative of treating people as ends and not merely as means points towards a striving precisely beyond ‘individualism’, but its very formulation depends on the relation of rational beings to one another in the kingdom of ends.

Karl Marx It is, further, a selective reading and distortion to portray ‘the Western tradition’⁴³ as not being open to the purported *ubuntu* idea of being a person through others. In his famous theses on Feuerbach (1845, published 1888) Marx states unambiguously in the sixth thesis that Feuerbach dissolves the religious essence into the human essence. The problem is that Feuerbach presupposes ‘... an abstract—isolated—human being’ whereas ‘the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality *it is the ensemble of the social relations*’ (my emphasis).⁴⁴ This must be understood from Marx’s theory of social classes, steering him sociologically speaking towards an explanation of individuals from their embeddedness in material, historical social relations, exactly against strands of individualism that view the single, autonomous person as unit of social analysis.

The intention for constructing relational personhood by the philosophers referred to above is not to merely make an abstract ontological point about the human person, but to infuse a moral dimension into their philosophy. This is apparent from Descartes’ notion of moral perfection, Kant’s communal law-making, and Marx’s class struggle towards a more just society.

⁴³ In her recent doctoral dissertation with the interesting title *Ein-ander nötig sein*, Sarah Bianchi (2016) demonstrates that intersubjective, existential recognition (‘intersubjektive existentielle Anerkennung’) is a recurring theme in Fichte, Hegel and, the focus of her dissertation, Friedrich Nietzsche. Literally translated, she explores the notion that ‘we need one another’ from a philosophical perspective.

⁴⁴ This translation of Thesis VI was retrieved on 26 January 2017 from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

In their efforts to create an African ethic, most *ubuntu* scholars work with false generalisations of both Africa and the West, as well as with assumed dichotomies between them. This is a well-known rhetorical strategy: One creates space for one’s own view by building an exaggerated contrast position of the other. In terms of a decolonising project, it would, however, be a deep irony and a sign of a colonised hermeneutic if African ethicists call on a decontextualised and selective interpretation of Western philosophy to argue for their own uniqueness and contextuality.

With the discussions above as background, the question posed in the title of this paper may now be addressed with greater focus: Does *ubuntu* ethics save us from coloniality, and, if so, in what sense?

Does *Ubuntu* Ethics Provide an Escape from Coloniality?

The background to this paper is the debate whether one could steer between the ‘immovable rock’ of Afrocentric and ‘the bad place’ of Eurocentric knowledges (Cooper and Morell 2014, p. 2). On the assumption of an agreement that the current situation requires acts of ‘decolonisation’, a possible option is to enter into a process of decentring the West and replace it with Africa. In other words, Eurocentrism is replaced by Afro-centrism. Mbembe (with reference to Ngugi) explains decolonisation exactly as such a process of decentring. ‘It is about rejecting the assumption that the modern West is the central root of Africa’s consciousness and cultural heritage. It is about rejecting the notion that Africa is merely an extension of the West’ (Mbembe 2015, p. 16). A new centre should be created: ‘*With Africa at the centre of things*, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective’ (Mbembe 2015, p. 17, my emphasis).

Apart from the question how this should happen in practice, it seems unethical to in the end mimic the coloniality from which we try to escape in creating a new power asymmetry where Africans exercise power over others.⁴⁵

A variation of this idea and a ‘softer’ version of Afrocentrism is the proposal for ‘Africa-centred knowledges’. This implies that ‘knowledge can become Africa-centred regardless of where they originate. But they do so only when they get entangled in African realities, lexicons and matrices and are shaped by these contexts’ (Cooper and Morell 2014, pp. 4–5). Africa is then not so much a new centre, but a

⁴⁵ The ‘centre’ of knowledge is not geographically fixed: There were times that Africa—via the Egyptian empire for example—was at the epicentre of architecture, mathematics and art. It is the process of globalisation in modern times that currently gives Western science its universal hold.

legitimate context which is taken seriously in the pursuit of multiple knowledges in an intermediate space between the West and Africa.⁴⁶

It is fairly straightforward to see that the transfer model of business ethics (see “[The Transfer Model](#)” section) does not qualify to fit into either an African- or Africa-centred paradigm, and in fact prolongs a colonial mindset. Insofar as the three forms of the translation model (see “[The Translation Model](#)” section) are each in its own way a contextualising of Western knowledge in Africa, they do weaken the dominant Eurocentric or Western view and indeed provide a minimal level of recourse from coloniality. But because the assumption of Western theories remain, this effort at decolonisation only functions at the level of de- and re-contextualisation with minimal, if any, *epistemological* challenge to prevailing Western moral philosophies.

The question then remains: Do the efforts to build a substantive, alternative *ubuntu* ethics (as set out in 2.3 above) transcend decolonisation-as-contextualisation towards a genuine escape from epistemological coloniality? The critical exposition above already points to just how difficult it is to escape from coloniality:

The dominant languages expressing *ubuntu* ideas are colonial English and French, and the means of knowledge production and distribution are via mainline universities, conferences, journals and publishers. Even *ubuntu* requires the very infrastructure and means seen as oppressive colonial power structures. The reason is simple: *Ubuntu* scholars also wish to be taken seriously. And they know that ‘acceptance’ and ‘validation’ of *ubuntu* scholarship are still subject to the hegemony of the North. The rule is clear: so-called indigenous knowledge is only ‘knowledge’ once endorsed by the centre.

For *ubuntu* to be taken seriously as alternative rival ethical theory (see Metz above), it must be contrasted with dominant and standard Western traditions.⁴⁷ Its own particularity is premised upon that which it tries to undermine, escape or complement.⁴⁸ The post-colonial thinker is forever bound to the colony and the thought patterns underlying Western paradigms. The methods and interpretative categories are borrowed from the West. Ramose premises his linguistic

analysis of *ubuntu* on Heraclitus’ view of motion (Ramose 2002a, p. 645) and Heidegger’s etymological discussion of *aletheia* (Ramose 2007, p. 354). And in his development of an African philosophy he uses standard Western categories such as epistemology, ontology, ethics⁴⁹ and metaphysics. He, and others, cannot jump over the shadow of the European tradition.

Why is an Escape from Epistemic Coloniality So Difficult?

To understand why the task of epistemological liberation from Western models is so difficult and not particular to (business) ethics, two explanatory factors need to be taken into account:

First. Efforts at constructing an African ethic like *ubuntu*, is a theoretical task. It therefore represents second-order knowledge. This is to be distinguished from first-order or tacit knowledge.

Tacit knowledges—including moral knowledge—are assumed by people in their everyday lives and are expressed in many forms: stories, anecdotes, beliefs, customs, songs, feasts. All social contexts, not only ‘indigenous’ or ‘African’ ones, are rich with a multiplicity of moral knowledges. These moral knowledges imply cosmologies and sustain worldviews taken for granted, and their validity is not usually called into question. Life simply goes on.

But the moment it is asked: ‘What is *scientific* or (in this essay) *ethical* knowledge?’, a different epistemic realm with much stricter rules of validity comes into play. Not everything counts as ‘evidence’ and not anyone is a valid ‘source’. The modern Western tradition has, for now, definitively shaped the nature of what we call scientific, academic knowledge—including ethics and moral philosophy—and therefore dominates the content and paradigms of our theorising efforts.

The challenge, as was demonstrated in the ethics discussion above, is that the moment indigenous moral knowledge of ‘sub-Saharan bantu-speaking peoples’ is made into an object of study beyond its lived reality,⁵⁰ the shadow of

⁴⁶ This is no easy task: ‘Given the imbalance of world power, as reflected in its knowledge assumptions, those who choose to occupy this creative, suggestive third space, struggle to enlarge its archives, its case histories, and its theoretical concepts’ (Cooper and Morrell 2014, p. 7).

⁴⁷ See Metz, who clearly aims at designing ‘a competitive African moral theory’, which may be ‘compared to dominant Western theories such as Hobbesian egoism or Kantian respect for persons’ (Metz 2007b, pp. 321, 341).

⁴⁸ See Augustine Shutte’s attempt (2001) to develop a complementary model synthesised from ‘African’ and ‘Western’ thinking.

⁴⁹ Ramose (2002b, p. 330) uses, for example, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1909) for his definition of ethics. There is nothing ‘wrong’ with this referencing. I am merely positing that, in the context of a decolonisation project, this reliance on ‘colonial’ sources is common, if not unavoidable.

⁵⁰ The reference here is to the transition from implicit to explicit knowledge. For example, oral histories may be important sources for historical knowledge, but they will not simply be accepted on face value or on the basis of traditional authority figures. No, they will be subjected to triangulation, for example by being compared with competing oral accounts and other non-oral sources stemming from the same period. In this sense, history is a science, albeit different from physics, but also different from tacit indigenous perceptions of the past.

the Western canon with its particular thought forms looms large. Look, for example, at this quotation from Hoppers and Richards (2011) who argue strongly for the epistemic deconstruction of Western science:

Whenever we look deeply at African society, or indeed most indigenous societies, the empirical fact that stares back at us is a reality of life lived differently, lives constituted around different metaphysics of economic, of law, of science, of healing ... The problem before us is that the academy has not adopted to its natural context, or has resisted epistemologically, cosmologically and culturally—with immense ensuing cognitive injustice to boot! (2012, p. 10).

However, the construction of an ‘empirical fact’ and the description of indigenous cultures in etic, theoretical categories like ‘cosmology’, ‘metaphysics’, ‘epistemology’, and so forth (including ‘ethics’!) are clearly inferred from the Western academic tradition and constitute acts of colonisation and epistemic injustice—the exact opposite of what the authors intended.

The second factor that complicates an escape from paradigmatic or theoretical coloniality has to do with the global nature of ‘Western’ science:

What is described as ‘modern scientific thinking’ is indeed a fairly recent phenomenon in human history. If we take David Wootton’s magisterial history of the scientific revolution as reference point (Wootton 2015), this ‘new science’ only finds its foothold in the period between 1492 and 1750. It introduced a new understanding of knowledge with a new language in which terms such as ‘discovery’, ‘hypotheses’, ‘experiments’, ‘theories’ and ‘laws’ of nature assumed a new meaning. Decolonisers are therefore right that this kind of knowledge is relative to the longer preceding history of knowledges; it is further relative to current indigenous knowledges as well as to the specific geography in which it first emerged, namely Western Europe. This particular scientific way of thinking therefore in principle qualifies for the description of a ‘local’ knowledge.

However, this ‘locality’ has in the meantime been ‘universalised’ in at least two ways:

First, the successful translation of Western scientific knowledge into all sorts of technologies has and will continue to shape the global world. Science constitutes the inescapable basis of our everyday lives, no matter our location. If some decolonisers call for the suspension of well-established knowledges that underlie the many positive fruits of these valid knowledges (such as flying in an aeroplane, using antiretroviral medicine, halting the spread of cholera and malaria, and talking on our mobile phones), they will not be taken seriously. Each of these technologies is the product of stable modern knowledges that are, for now, accepted as valid. Translated into technology their trusted and stable

validity, as measured in scientific terms, is indeed useful to all people. We, inescapably, live in and benefit from a ‘scientific’ world, shaped by modernity and the Enlightenment.

Second, the idea that ‘science’ is a ‘local’ form of ‘Western’ knowledge has been superseded by both academic and economic globalisation. If one takes into account the spread of scientific knowledge in its ‘Western’ form across the globe via the international university system, and if one, for example, looks at manufactured products with a global supply chain, it has almost become superfluous to speak of ‘Western’ knowledge. At this point in human history, the matrix of knowledge as scientific knowledge knows no geographical boundaries and is being advanced by scientists and being bought in consumer goods all over the globe, including Africa.⁵¹

The same globality holds for the development and advancement of ethical theories. Although ethics in the Western tradition pre-dates the Enlightenment, all theoretical models from Ancient Greek to late twentieth-century moral philosophers are now embedded in this global knowledge system that forms the inescapable matrix against which all ethical knowledge that claims to be valid, theoretical knowledge, is both framed and measured. That is why the good efforts at a substantive *ubuntu* ethics not only expresses itself via Western terminology, but as second-order knowledge also conforms to the validity standards of Western science—citing reliable and authoritative sources, making non-contradictory statements, building rational arguments, and so forth—against which decolonisation in its epistemic form exactly rebels.

Is There—In Principle—A Way Out?

Have we therefore reached a *cul de sac* in our efforts to overcome coloniality beyond contextualisation? I wish to argue to the contrary, on condition that a blind spot in the search for epistemic diversity⁵² in the decolonisation project is avoided:

If decolonisation critique is against scientism or positivistic knowledge where empirical observation and repeatable experiments are seen as the only form of valid knowledge,

⁵¹ The first successful heart transplant was done in Cape Town. No one considers medical transplant techniques as either ‘African’ or ‘Western’. They are simply transplant techniques. The new galaxies found by the Square Kilometre Array radio telescope (SKA) in the Northern Cape (South Africa) or a new human species found in the Cradle of Humanity in Gauteng (South Africa) is not ‘Western’ discoveries. They are simply discoveries by scientists who happen to work in Africa.

⁵² The most forceful and challenging text I have read in this vein is *Rethinking thinking: Modernity’s ‘other’ and the transformation of the university* (Hoppers and Richards 2011) from which a quotation is cited above.

decolonisers are in fact in good company. Philosophically this critique is well established in various forms of post-positivist thinking from Popper's falsification and Kuhn's paradigm theories to different strands of social constructivism. This is not a new idea.

The blind spot of some proponents of decolonisation in seeking greater room for other forms of knowledge than 'scientific' knowledge is that they focus chiefly on the natural sciences. They consequently miss the point that 'knowledge' in any modern university includes a rich variety of perspectives that do not conform to a narrow definition of experimental validity or the requirement of quantitative exactitude that works so well in mathematics, physics or engineering.

Western science itself has developed a rich diversity of epistemologies in fields of enquiry such as economics, history, philosophy, literature, psychology, theology, art, or what one could bundle together as the humanities and social sciences. Ethics and moral philosophy form an integral part of these knowledge forms, and they challenge the narrow empiricist scientific tradition. The key consequence is that this epistemic diversity beyond empiricism opens these disciplines up to embrace what has become known as 'indigenous' knowledges⁵³: Historians recognise that oral histories are crucial for access to an oral past; local music and song are important sources of anthropological understanding; archaeological artefacts open doors on the lifestyle of past communities; traditional healers already assist in a richer definition of health, and—in the context of this essay—forms of tacit moral knowledge about personhood-in-community, expressed via *ubuntu*, have the potential to eventually disrupt and enhance our existing ethical theories and move from mere (de)-contextualisation to a transcendence of epistemic coloniality.

This disruptive and complementary potential is enhanced by the fact that the very nature of post-positivist knowledge invites falsification and paradigm revolutions. As African intellectuals we should exploit this inherent trait of Western knowledge and actively create space for dissenting views, especially those from the so-called margins.⁵⁴ This will undermine current privileges and weaken current academic power nestled in conferences, universities and journals. This will expose and deconstruct the social and epistemic violence accompanying the modern Western scientific tradition. Such dissent and critique are 'rational' things to do, as they increase the likelihood of growth in scientific knowledge as

so eloquently described by Popper and Kuhn.⁵⁵ As Mbembe said (with reference to Enrique Dussel), for knowledge to be universal, it must also be pluriversal. We must therefore transform the university into a pluriversity (Mbembe 2015, p. 19)⁵⁶ by continuing to pursue decolonisation via 'local' knowledge forms, and by being more radical in our search for genuine alternative thought forms.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this essay is that the substantive effort to construct an alternative moral theory via *ubuntu* represents the strongest form of de- and re-contextualisation of Western knowledge if compared with transfer and translation models of business ethics and hence qualifies as a decolonised form of Africa-centred knowledge. In this limited sense, then, *ubuntu* does provide a decentring of Eurocentric views and consequently a tempering of coloniality.

But on the stronger claim of actual epistemic decolonisation, it is apparent that the *ubuntu* project—like all forms of theoretical-scientific knowledge—is invariably steeped in Western knowledge forms and rules of validation. From this perspective, and judged by the more fundamental epistemic demands of decolonisation, *ubuntu* is in fact a perpetuation and further reinforcement of a colonial mindset.

Because post-positivist, 'Western' scientific knowledge is by definition and in principle open to falsification, efforts at decolonisation of moral philosophy may yet yield ethical theories with superior problem-solving and alternative expressive abilities, leading to new knowledge paradigms. In light of the current state of African business ethics scholarship, and the fact that relief cannot readily be expected from 'Western' ethicists, the prospect of success does not look good, unless we radically reconceptualise what is counted as moral 'problems', moral 'solutions' and—ultimately—moral 'theory'.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

⁵³ If there are indeed indigenous knowledges that are constructed along alternative epistemic lines, they should develop their own criteria for validity, unless anything that anybody says or believes is 'true' and the very notion of 'validity', even internally, is rejected.

⁵⁴ These margins need not be geographical. The issue of women and minorities in science, the presence of the South in the North and so forth must be taken into account for a richer version of 'marginality'.

⁵⁵ See Popper's notion of falsification in his *Logic of scientific discovery* (1959) and Kuhn's idea of normal and revolutionary science in his *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1962).

⁵⁶ In this vein, it would, for example, be advisable to include a discussion of *ubuntu*, to make explicit the work of Africans in an ethics curriculum, and to use *ubuntu* as the prism through which dominant Western theories are viewed. This is an act of decentring that could have a significant decolonising effect.

References

- Assmann, J. (2002). Der eine lebt, wenn der andere ihn geleitet. Altägyptische Konzepte vom konnektiven Leben. In K.-P. Köpping, M. Welker, & R. Wiehl (Eds.), *Die autonome Person – eine Europäische Erfindung?* (pp. 15–28). München: Wilhelm Fink.
- Bianchi, S. (2016). *Einander nötig sein. Existentielle Anerkennung by Nietzsche*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink.
- Broodryk, J. (1996). Is Ubuntuism unique. In J. Malherbe (Ed.), *Decolonizing the mind: Proceedings of the 2nd Colloquium on African Philosophy* (pp. 30–37). Pretoria: Unisa Press.
- Broodryk, J. (2005). *Ubuntu management philosophy*. Randburg: Knowres.
- Center of Study and Investigation for Decolonial Dialogues. *Decolonizing Knowledge and Power: Postcolonial Studies, Decolonial Horizons*. Retrieved from <http://www.dialogoglobal.com/barcelona/description.php>. Accessed January 19, 2017.
- Comaroff, J. L., & Comaroff, J. (2002). On personhood. An anthropological perspective from Africa. In Klaus-Peter Köpping, Michael Welker, & Reiner Wiehl (Eds.), *Die autonome Person – Eine Europäische Erfindung?* (pp. 67–82). München: Wilhelm Fink.
- Cooper, B., & Morell, R. (Eds.). (2014). *Africa-centred knowledges*. Suffolk: James Curry.
- Descartes, R. (1952). Meditations on first philosophy (trans. E.S. Haldane & G.R.T. Ross). In *Great books of the Western world* (Vol. 31, pp. 69–103). London: Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- Fishbane, M. (2002). Covenantal theonomy and the question of autonomous selfhood: Three spiritual types. In K.-P. Köpping, M. Welker, & R. Wiehl (Eds.), *Die autonome Person – eine Europäische Erfindung?* (pp. 113–130). München: Wilhelm Fink.
- Gyekye, K. (2002). Person and community in African thought. In P. H. Coetzee & P. J. Roux (Eds.), *The African philosophy reader* (2nd ed., pp. 297–314). London: Routledge.
- Hölscher, T. (2014). Money and image: The presence of the state on the routes of economy. In J. von Hagen & M. Welker (Eds.), *Money as God? The monetization of the market in its impact on religion, politics, law, and ethics* (pp. 111–136). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoppers, C. O., & Richards, H. (2011). *Rethinking thinking: Modernity's "other" and the transformation of the university*. Pretoria: Unisa.
- Kant, I. (1784). Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, December, pp. 481–494.
- Kant, I. (1964). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (trans. H.J. Paton). New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of pure reason*. (The Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood). Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Keller, C. (2002). The subject of complexity. Autonomy and auto-poiesis. In K.-P. Köpping, M. Welker, & R. Wiehl (Eds.), *Die autonome Person – eine Europäische Erfindung?* (pp. 193–202). München: Wilhelm Fink.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lu, X. (2010). *Business ethics: A Chinese approach*. Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.
- Lutz, D. W. (2009). African Ubuntu philosophy and global management. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84(suppl. 3), 314–328.
- Marx, K. (1888). *Six theses on Feuerbach*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm> Accessed February 2, 2017.
- Mbembe, A. (2015). *Decolonising knowledge and the question of the archive*. Lecture delivered at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research. Retrieved from <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/sites/default/files/private/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf>. Accessed January 19, 2017.
- Mbigi, L. (2005). *The spirit of African leadership*. Randburg: Knowres.
- Mbiti, J. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- McDonald, D. A. (2010). Ubuntu bashing: The marketization of 'African values' in South Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, 37(124), 139–152.
- Menkiti, I. A. (1984). Person and community in traditional African thought. Retrieved from www2.southeastern.edu/Academic/Faculty/mrossano/gradseminar/evo%20of%20ritual/African%20traditional%20thought.pdf. Accessed January 25, 2017.
- Metz, T. (2007a). The motivation for "Toward an African moral theory". *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 26(4), 331–333.
- Metz, T. (2007b). Toward an African moral theory. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15(3), 321–341.
- Metz, T. (2007c). Ubuntu as a moral theory: Reply to four critics. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 26(4), 369–387.
- Metz, T. (2012). An African theory of moral status: A relational alternative to individualism and holism. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 15, 387–402.
- Msilu, V. (2016). *Ubuntu. Shaping the current workplace with (African) wisdom*. Randburg: Knowres.
- Naudé, P. (2007). In defense of partisan justice: What can African business ethics learn from John Rawls? *African Journal of Business Ethics*, 2(1), 40–44.
- Naudé, P. (2011). Business ethics (2010): A review essay. *African Journal of Business Ethics*, 5(2), 103–105.
- Naudé, P. (2013). "Am I my brother's keeper?" An African reflection on humanization. *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*, 54(3&4), 241–253.
- Nitobe, I. (2004). *Bushido: Samurai ethics and the soul of Japan*. New York, NY: Dover.
- Nussbaum, B. (2009). Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on our common humanity. In M. F. Murove (Ed.), *African ethics: An anthology of comparative and applied ethics* (pp. 100–110). Scottsville: UKZN Press.
- Perler, D. (2002). Descartes' Transformation des Personenbegriffs. In K.-P. Köpping, M. Welker, & R. Wiehl (Eds.), *Die autonome Person – eine Europäische Erfindung?* (pp. 141–162). München: Wilhelm Fink.
- Popper, K. (1959). *Logic of scientific discovery*. London: Hutchinson.
- Porter, M., & Kramer, M. (2011). Creating shared value. *The Harvard Business Review*, 89(1/2), 62–77.
- Rachel, J. (Ed.). (1989). *The right thing to do. Basic readings in moral philosophy*. New York: Random House.
- Ramose, M. B. (2002a). Globalisation and ubuntu. In P. H. Coetzee & P. J. Roux (Eds.), *The African philosophy reader* (2nd ed., pp. 626–650). London: Routledge.
- Ramose, M. B. (2002b). The ethics of Ubuntu. In P. H. Coetzee & P. J. Roux (Eds.), *The African philosophy reader* (2nd ed., pp. 324–330). London: Routledge.
- Ramose, M. B. (2002c). The philosophy of Ubuntu, and ubuntu as a philosophy. In P. H. Coetzee & P. J. Roux (Eds.), *The African philosophy reader* (2nd ed., pp. 230–238). London: Routledge.
- Ramose, M. B. (2007). But Hans Kelsen was not born in Africa: A reply to Thaddeus Metz. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 26(4), 347–355.
- Rossouw, D., & Van Vuuren, L. (2013). *Business ethics* (5th ed.). Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Shutte, A. (2001). *Ubuntu: An ethic for the new South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

- Smit, D. J. (2007). *Essays in public theology: Collected essays I*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press.
- Tönnies, F. (1922). *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologie*. Berlin: Curtius.
- West, A. (2014). Ubuntu and business ethics: Problems, perspectives and prospects. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 121, 47–61.
- Wootton, D. (2015). *The invention of science: A new history of the scientific revolution*. London: Penguin Random House.